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ABSTRACT

The author of the paper examines the experience of black women at predominantly white universities who are confronted with problems emanating from sexism and racism in classroom and non-classroom situations and which acquire complexity because of their subtlety and socially reinforced attitudinal origins. The author points to the black females who have grown increasingly dissatisfied with the service professions to which they have historically been admitted and who at the same time have begun to examine seriously the mores which have labelled them intellectually inferior because of their sex. Perceptions of her own ability and professional potential create under tensions when they conflict with the self-image imposed upon her by a white, male dominated society. The author feels that educators, counselors, and others can make significant strides in reducing and eliminating special problems of black women by setting new priorities and goals and by being aware of biases which do exist. (Author/SES)

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SOCIAL PROBLEMS CONFRONTING BLACK WOMEN AT WHITE INSTITUTIONS

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I have frequently found myself caught in the "double bind" of being black and female. During my own college years, I spent a large portion of my energies attempting to identify and live with the injustices perpetrated against me as a result of sexism and racism. For instance, I can recall my parents "understanding" when I decided to change my major from medical technology to secondary education, and their encouraging comments about, "what a good teacher I would make." I remember being told by the food service department at the university I attended that there were no jobs available, and learning that my white roommate had applied and been hired later the same afternoon.

My experience is not unique. Black women at predominantly white universities are confronted with similar problems---- problems emanating from sexism and racism in classroom and non-classroom situations, and which acquire complexity because of their subtly, and socially reinforced attitudinal origins. Any examination of her experience must necessarily take into account the myths associated with blacks and females in general, and the black female specifically.

The assumption that women....all women....go to college in search of marriage partners is still prevalent in the minds of many. What is not considered, however, is the fact that "for a variety of reasons, there is an imbalance in the male-female ratio in the black community, especially during the marriageable years - 18 to 45. This means that black women must compete for a

relatively scarce commodity when they look forward to marriage."[1] Pauli Murray substantiates this finding by stating that "in the Negro population, the excess of women is greatest in the fifteen to forty-four age group which covers the college years and the age when most marriages occur.... The explosive social implications of the excess of more than half a million Negro women over fourteen years of age are obvious."[2]

Clearly, the assumption is an absurdity with regard to black females who enroll, by choice, in predominantly white institutions where the total number of blacks is usually proportionally small, and the number of "available" black males is even smaller.

A Black coed in her junior year at a white university summarized her feelings on this issue with this statement: "If I were looking for a husband, I would have chosen a school where the odds were a whole lot better, and the work much easier."

What then, you may ask, is the motivation for the spiralling enrollment of black women at these institutions? Evidence indicates that in recent years, black females have grown increasingly dissatisfied with the service professions to which they have historically been admitted, and consequently have become dissatisfied with the predominantly black colleges which have developed curricula to accommodate them primarily in social work, public school teaching, nursing, nutrition, and food preparation--

[1]Robert Staples, "The Myth of the Black Matriarchy", The Black Scholar, January-February 1970, p. 14.

[2]Pauli Murray, "The Negro Woman in the Quest for Equality", a paper presented at Leadership Conference, National Council of Negro Women. (Washington, D.C., November 1963), pp. 11-12, 12-13.

fields which program you for homemaking - type lifestyles. Spurred by the current social mood, black women have begun to seriously examine and question the mores which have labeled them intellectually inferior because of their sex. Perceptions of her own ability and professional potential create inner tensions when they conflict with the self-image imposed upon her by a white, male dominated society. These tensions, coupled with the black woman's consciousness and desire to remediate the gross under-representation of black females among the nations doctors, lawyers, chemists, economists, architects, engineers and other high status professions, are beginning to shake the citadels of so-called masculine superiority. Black women are no longer willing to follow the path of least resistance. These factors have significant impact upon her choice of major, and subsequently upon her choice of schools. I firmly believe that when she decides to pursue a career in the high status professions at a predominantly white university, she is aware that she is reducing significantly her chances of marriage during her college years, and possibly thereafter.

The experience of the black female in the academic arena merits attention at this point. Data published in the 93rd Annual Edition of The Statistical Abstract of the United States suggests a substantial imbalance in the number of black and white college faculty members at universities nationwide. There is a preponderance of white male instructors, and a virtual absence of blacks, both male and female. Hence, the likelihood that the black coed

will most frequently encounter white male instructors in the classroom.

Her very presence, particularly in classes with a quantitative and scientific focus, is a reality inconsistent with his social conditioning and the idea of the "woman's place." Role and interpersonal conflicts, that is, conflict between his role designation as facilitator of student movement towards desired career goals and his personal social values, may result in the transmission of emotionally charged messages. These messages may create barriers between him and his black female students, prohibiting a two-way flow of information and ideas related to course content. His conflicting attitudes take many forms.

Commonly held notions about black intelligence still run rampant despite research which indicates that although black students are generally less successful than whites academically, black females achieve higher grade point averages than black males during the freshman year, and show significant academic improvement and consistency thereafter. The white instructor's belief, in such notions, may manifest itself as a frown or quick change of subject when the black female questions him concerning course related information, or offers opposing opinions during class discussions. Instructors may attribute any significant achievement on her part to "luck", "good guessing", "cheating", and even to faulty test construction on his part----anything, rather than give credit where credit is due!

Constant reference to the accomplishments of <u>men</u> in "his

field", or jokes about women in general, consciously or unconsciously raised, may suggest to the black female that she is not accepted as a potential equal in a field traditionally reserved "for males only."

"An infant derives his primary vital recognition through physical handling and stroking. Once past infancy, we symbolize. According to Eric Berne and his theory of transactional analysis, people transact to exchange units of recognition or "strokes." We register strokes from smiles, frowns, voice quality, and finally, from words. Eventually, we store strokes and replay them for ourselves at future times. This is an advantage in times of stress or scarcity, but not when a person depends on stored strokes in preference to honest interchange with others."[3]

In essence, Black females in the classroom seldom receive the kind of positive stroking needed, and they are not likely to have a sufficient store accumulated from non-classroom interactions.

"White colleges that deliberately recruit black students must enroll at least a few hundred lest they condemn a small number of black students to inadequate social lives."[4]

This statement by Willie and Levy, a result of their study of the black experience at predominantly white schools, has particular relevance to the black female's plight, let us examine

[3]Fanita English, "TA's Disney World, "Psychology Today", April 1973, p. 47.

[4]Joan D. Levy and Charles V. Willie, "Black is Lonely", Psychology Today, March 1972, p. 52 & 76.

some of the factors that have bearing on the social life of these coeds.

Women at an early age begin to acquire a repetoire of behaviors and attitudes that have serious implications for their social relationships. While browsing through a handout distributed at a recent conference sponsored by Carnegie-Mellon's feminist organization, "Up Your Image", I began to weigh the consequences of:

- being given dolls to play with when you are really fascinated by Tinker Toys.
- constantly being reminded to "act like a lady."
- learning that something you do is "naughty", but when your brother does the same thing, it's "spunky."
- hearing grown-ups chuckle when you say you want to be an engineer or a doctor when you grow up----and learning to say you want to be a mommy or a nurse instead.
- liking math or history a lot and getting hints that boys are turned off by smart girls.

Add to these rituals the erroneous myth of the black matriarch, with its claims that the domineering black female has ascended to a power position in black society, resulting in the psychological castration of black males, and the sum is----an intense strain on black male/female relationships.

A black coed related this experience:

"My boyfriend and I were studying one night and I noticed that he was wrestling with a homework problem. Since math is my thing, I thought I might be able to help. I asked myself, "should I offer, or shouldn't I?" I decided not to. He's always teasing me about being a "brain." An hour later, he was still sighing and frowning, so I asked if I could help. He hesitated, then said, "yeah, but

you probably can't do it either." Ten minutes later the problem was solved----and he had an attitude for the rest of the evening.

Her anxiety and discomfort suggested to me that not only are there discrepancies between the myth, the conditioning, and the reality of the black female experience, but also that there is a problem of knowing how to respond to such situations in ways that are least detrimental to male-female relationships. Oftentimes, "the joy of finding someone with whom you have much in common is tempered by anxiety that the small black population on campus may not yield another compatible relationship if the existing one should end. Thus, one partner may press another prematurely for an exclusive relationship,"[5] or may feel forced to endure exploitative or abusive behavior in an effort to "make it work."

The small black population limits dating opportunities for black females. Because of negative social sanctions, females are less likely to date interracially, or even to initiate relationships with black males, lest she become branded forward and aggressive----both considered negative attributes in a woman, and mandatory in a man.

What about off- or cross-campus dating? Where schools are advantageously situated, this poses possibilities----but usually for black males, who have a premium on dating mobility and freedom anyway. The status of the school has its advantages for him too. Black males, venturing off campus from white universities in the higher echelons of academia, are considered "good catches",

[5]Levy and Willie, p. 52.

"prospective long term mates", and are usually well received. However, black females, in similar situations, are stereotyped as "brains", add therefore, "social duds." Afterall, she couldn't possibly be warm and feminine, and a physics major, too!!

The black sex ration imbalance is magnified on white college campuses. Lack of success in the fierce competition for male companionship can leave the black female questioning her own worth, and locked into the low status role of a woman without a man in a couple-oriented society.

To discuss the social life of black women solely in terms of their success or failure in securing male companionship is an error. Many women have, and should be encouraged to explore alternative avenues to the kinds of social interactions that are both rewarding and facilitative to personal growth and development. Sororities, campus boards, councils, and committees offer such avenues. Sorority membership affords many women close personal contacts and the opportunity to function socially. This kind of group affiliation almost guarantees certain assumptions about its members in a social context, assumptions which provide an "in", assumptions that supersede the nature of the school you attend, your major, or your usual social desirability. Participation in campus student councils, dorm and recreation committees present opportunities for black women to exercise their leadership abilities, pursue their interest, and increase their interpersonal contacts. Efforts to move in these directions are sometimes

dampened because of peer pressures, or the fear, uncertainty and loneliness often accompanying positions of leadership and movement into previously male or white dominated areas of campus life.

However, failure to pursue these and similar alternative avenues despite the discomforts, sitting back waiting for someone else to make it happen, makes the black woman an accomplice to her own social and emotional destruction.

The psychological consequences of sexism and racism for black women on predominantly white campuses can be devasting. The price of satisfying her intellectual and professional aspirations can be high indeed.

While researching this presentation, I was reminded of the riddle, "which comes first, the chicken or the egg", for I could not decide which of the two, racism or sexism, had the most profound effect upon the black female.

Let me conclude by saying that as behavioral and social scientists, administrators, educators, counselors, parents, men and women, we are in positions to serve as agents for social change. We can continue to make significant strides towards the reduction and elimination of the special problems of black women, if we but set new priorities, new goals in our homes, schools, and in our general contacts with others. It means broadening and being more flexible around our definitions of "appropriate" female behaviors and roles. It means being aware of our own biases so that we can avoid stereotyped counseling, teaching, and child rearing

practices. And perhaps most importantly, as Congresswoman Shirley Chisolm aptly put it, it means that we must stop "mentally" deleting things she might have been, and adding things society traditionally says she must be as soon as the doctor declares, "Mrs. Jones, it's a beautiful baby girl!!"[5]

[5]Shirley Chisolm, "Racism and Anti-Feminism", The Black Scholar January-February 1970, p. 45.

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